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Orthodontists vs. Dentist Specialties: What You Should Know

by Sarah Carpenter

If you've ever wondered about orthodontists vs. dentist specialties, you're not alone. They are both doctors who treat oral health conditions. So, aren't they the same? No, they're not. They're actually quite different.

Orthodontists receive additional, specialized training which qualifies them to install braces and diagnose a misaligned jaw. If you need to see an orthodontist, you ask your dentist for a referral. Dentistry, on the other hand, covers a broad category of conditions that deals with the teeth, gums, facial nerves and jaws. Did you know that all orthodontists are dentists, but not all dentists are licensed orthodontists? Let's take a closer look at the similarities and differences between the specialties of orthodontists and dentists.

What Is an Orthodontist?

An orthodontist is a dentist trained to diagnose, prevent and treat teeth and jaw irregularities. They correct existing conditions and are trained to identify problems that may develop in the future. On average, it can take 10 to 11 years to become an orthodontist. There are three steps in their education: college (four years), dental school (four years) and orthodontic school (two to three years).

Similar to becoming a medical specialist, such as a surgeon or an internist, orthodontists complete an orthodontic residency program for two to three years after dental school. While there's some instruction regarding orthodontics in dental school, it is minimal. It's in the orthodontic residency program where orthodontists receive intensive instruction to learn proper, safe tooth movement (orthodontics) and the guidance of dental, jaw and facial development (dentofacial orthopedics). These extra years of schooling make the orthodontist the dental specialist in moving teeth and aligning jaws. This is the only focus of their practice. Like dentists, orthodontists work with people of all ages — from children to adults.

What Does an Orthodontist Do?

Orthodontists [diagnose, prevent, intercept and treat](#) dental and facial irregularities. These problems may include teeth that are crowded or too far apart, teeth that meet abnormally or don't meet at all,

teeth that stick out and mismatched jaws. They also help with overbites and underbites, crossbites and the treatment of temporomandibular disorders.

Orthodontists treat existing problems, can identify problems that are developing and take timely action to resolve problems before they fully develop. They create a custom treatment plan for each patient because every patient is different. Orthodontists use a full range of “appliances” to correct orthodontic problems. The term “appliance” is used for the device that moves teeth. It can be traditional braces, clear braces, invisible aligners or braces on the inside of the teeth. The orthodontist is uniquely qualified to recommend the most appropriate type of “appliance” to correct an individual’s problem.

What Is a Dentist?

Dentists are doctors who [diagnose and treat problems with patients’ teeth](#), gums and related parts of the mouth. They provide advice and instruction on taking care of the teeth and gums and diet choices that affect oral health. To become a dentist, it generally takes eight years: four years to earn a bachelor’s degree as an undergraduate and four years to earn a DDS or DMD in dental school.

If they are interested in specializing, they’ll also need to complete a dental residency which requires two or more additional years of dental specialty education. [There are 12 dental specialties](#) (orthodontics being one of them). They are dental anesthesiology, dental public health, endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral medicine, orofacial pain [management], orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics, pediatric dentistry and periodontics and prosthodontics. Like orthodontists, dentists work with people of all ages — from children to adults.

What Does a Dentist Do?

A dentist’s job is to make sure teeth are healthy and to help people keep them clean. Dentists perform a variety of services that affect oral health. To complete these services, they use many kinds of equipment including x-ray machines, drills, mouth mirrors, probes, forceps, brushes, scalpels, lasers, digital scanners and other technologies.

Most dentists are general practitioners. They typically do the following:

- Remove decay from teeth and fill cavities.
- Repair or remove damaged teeth.
- Place sealants or whitening agents on teeth.
- Administer anesthetics to keep patients from feeling pain during procedures.
- Prescribe antibiotics or other medications.
- Examine x-rays or scans of teeth, gums, the jaw, and nearby areas in order to diagnose problems.
- Make models and measurements for dental appliances such as dentures.
- Teach patients about diets, flossing, the use of fluoride and other aspects of dental care.

In addition, dentists in private practice oversee a variety of administrative tasks including bookkeeping and buying equipment and supplies. They employ and supervise dental hygienists, dental assistants, dental laboratory technicians, receptionists, and office staff.

If I Need Dental Treatment, Should I Call an Orthodontist or a Dentist?

[Think of your dentist](#) as a general practitioner and your orthodontist as a specialist. There are some things that orthodontists are certified to do that dentists aren't. A trip to the dentist can resolve most standard dental issues. Tooth pain, tooth decay, tooth repair and tooth extraction can all be diagnosed and treated by your dentist. They can also treat gum disease, oral inflammation and oral infections. There may be cases when a dentist refers you to an orthodontist. Jaw malocclusion, tooth crowding and palate expansion may all require the input of an orthodontist. It's also recommended that an orthodontist assess all children before age 7 to see if braces will be needed. If you're an adult and suspect you have a crooked jawline or teeth that need to be aligned, you might consider skipping the dentist and going straight to the orthodontist.

Not all orthodontic care will be covered by insurance — even if you have dental coverage. An orthodontist is technically considered a specialist. In some cases, your insurance company will require a referral from a dentist before they'll pay for your visit to the orthodontist's office.

West Coast Dental Is Your One Stop Shop

There are many similarities and differences when it comes to orthodontists vs. dentist specialties. Whether you're seeking the services of an orthodontist or a dentist, you can find the right practitioner for you at West Coast Dental. We have specialists and general dentists who are ready to serve you and your dental needs. [Schedule an appointment](#) with us today.

Sarah Carpenter is a freelance writer whose portfolio spans the industries of health care, higher education and entertainment. Find out more at [her website](#).

References

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